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Middle East

The Challenge of Peacemaking

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Following is an address by Harold H. Saunders, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, before the Conference on U.S. Vital Interests in the Middle East in St. Louis on November 6, 1979.

I am delighted to be here in St. Louis to speak about the challenge of war and peace in the Middle East, and we appreciate the interest all of you have shown in coming to share this day with us. Conferences such as these give us in your Department of State a valuable opportunity to exchange perceptions with informed and interested citizens about what is at stake for all of us in this key area of the world—an area which Americans in many walks of life increasingly recognize can affect their lives and interests.

At the root of our exchange of views are some basic questions.

- Why is the United States so deeply involved in the search for peace in the Middle East?
- Does that involvement serve our national interests or threaten them?
- What are those national interests, and just how should we pursue them in this unstable region where change is taking place with unprecedented rapidity?

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The answers to these questions begin to define the elements of a truly national policy toward this troubled region. For years, Middle East policy was the preserve of a few specialists. Today it is the concern of all Americans.

The purpose of this conference has been to stimulate thought and to contribute to a greater understanding of the ingredients of our policy. For, without a national consensus about what the United States is trying to do in such a critical area and why, no policy—no matter how designed and executed from Washington—can succeed.

At the outset let me make three central points about the Middle East and then develop them in relation to the peacemaking process.

First. More important and yet different American interests converge in the Middle East today than in any other area of the developing world. The United States no longer has the choice of distancing itself from what happens there.

Second. Fundamental changes are taking place in the Middle East at breathtaking speed. Some of the richest and fastest modernizing nations in the world live side-by-side with some of

the poorest and most traditional nations, and all are coping with the impact of rapid change. Instability of some kind is inevitable. The issue is not whether we can avoid instability, but how we deal with it.

Third. Within this environment of high stakes and diverse interests, the only sensible policy for us is one which permits us to pursue all of our interests at the same time in conditions of orderly change. We must avoid being forced to make choices among our various interests because none is so unimportant that it can be sacrificed. This is in our interest. It is in the interest of our friends in the Middle East.

Important U.S. Interests

Any discussion of American interests in the Middle East today must begin with some thought about how American perceptions of the Middle East, and our interests there have changed in recent years. Only after such reflection do we see what is at stake.

For years the Middle East was thought of mainly in schoolbook geography terms as a "strategic crossroads," as a "land bridge" joining Asia, Africa, and Europe and forming the "life line" of the British Empire. In the 1950s and 1960s the area took on new geopolitical importance because of the oil it provided to our NATO allies and Japan and because of the importance of Turkey and Iran in containing Soviet expansion to the south toward that oil. Even during those years, however, the Middle East still did not seem to have direct overriding importance to the United States itself. We could still make the choice of standing a step back from direct involvement in its problem.

That situation has changed markedly in the 1970s. If we can just look for a moment at the five areas of primary interest which the United States has today in the Middle East we will see the extent of the change.

The **first** relates to the Soviet Union. While we have long recognized the importance of denying to the Soviet Union a predominant influence in the

Middle East, we have also learned in the heat of two crises that we have a particular concern to avoid confrontation with the Soviets there in this nuclear age. The Soviet Union, for reasons of power, oil, geographic proximity, and ethnic and cultural ties between elements of its population and peoples of the Middle East, also considers that it has interests in the area. Our interest is to help the nations of the area preserve their independence against any foreign domination.

But unlike Europe, where the lines between the Soviets and us are drawn both geographically and by precedent, the lines are not clearly drawn in the Middle East. Either by accident or by escalation, the two superpowers could end up in confrontation. Messages exchanged between Moscow and Washington in the heat of crisis in both the 1967 and the 1973 wars made that spectre all too clear. So today we are more acutely aware than ever before of the challenge of avoiding confrontation, while making certain that nations of the area preserve their independence.

Our second major interest is the security and well-being of Israel. Every American President since the establishment of Israel in 1948 has declared the unwavering American commitment to that end. Our two peoples have deep cultural and emotional ties which make relations between our two countries both unique and indestructible. We have stood by Israel through its wars and given generously to its development and defense. As President Carter has put it: "For 30 years we have stood at the side of the proud and independent nation of Israel. I can say without reservation, as President of the United States of America, that we will continue to do so not just for another 30 years, but forever." The United States will never support any agreement or any action that places Israel's security in jeopardy.

Today this traditional interest in Israel has new dimensions. During the early

days of the 1973 war Israeli reverses shook Israel's faith in its military prowess and led to a further military buildup. But those reverses also raised questions about whether over time Israel could depend solely on its military strength to survive.

Now the peace treaty with Egypt signed last March finally provides a practical complement. Today, for the first time, Israel has a realistic hope of assuring its future not just by arms alonethough these will always be necessary—but by developing peaceful relationships with its neighbors as an accepted member of the Middle East community of nations. In helping Israel realize this dream of peace with its largest neighbor, President Carter has given a new dimension to our commitment to Israel. We now have the historic challenge and opportunity to help determine what is necessary to provide Israel with security in peace as well as in war.

Our third interest is in the supply of Middle Eastern oil. We have long held that this oil must be available "at reasonable prices" to our allies who were so dependent on it. In this decade we see that oil in a different light. That dependence has hit closer to home. We need only remember the impact of the oil embargo of 1973-74, or again more recently the gas lines of early summer, to note that the United States itself now is deeply affected by imported oil, much of it from the Middle East. Because the greatest reserves are there, those nations also have the capacity to affect price as well as supply.

The fourth American interest, closely tied to the third, is maintenance of close and friendly ties with key moderate Arab nations. The reasons are both political and economic. Politically, the moderate leaders of the Middle East will set the character of that area for the remainder of the century. They control the forces which will be the first line of defense against any foreign domination.

Economically, the Middle East is among the fastest growing markets in

the world. We have an obvious interest in developing trade which will help offset the cost of oil. We also have a larger foreign policy interest in the growing network of relationships that link the people of this area to the people of the United States in common pursuits. Furthermore, the oilproducing nations of the Middle East, with their large supplies of capital, also have the capacity to influence world economic stability and to provide help to the developing nations with everything from expensive development projects to aid in meeting high energy costs.

Our fifth, and no means last, interest in the Middle East is a humanitarian one. We remain a nation concerned about the people of the area. For years we have provided assistance to refugees, whether from the Holocaust in Europe or from Arab villages in Palestine. We are now trying to help end the cycle of violence in southern Lebanon which has caused so much suffering to innocent civilians and caused 200,000 refugees to flee north from their homes. We have contributed to economic development of the poorer nations, and have provided necessary technology to those nations which have oil money.

Today exciting new opportunities exist. With the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty as the first step toward a comprehensive peace settlement, we have realistic hope of progress in resolving the Palestinian problem in all its aspects. We can look to the day when the refugees will no longer define their future in the hopelessness of the camps. This is a complex problem but also a vital human one. Until the Palestinian refugees can find dignity and hope in a future-until they can have a voice in the determination of that future and feel that peace in the Middle East has something in it for them-there can be no final peace in the Middle East. In facing this tragic human problem, we are deeply conscious that, as President Carter has said, it sometimes takes more courage to wage peace than to wage war.

Forces of Change

In considering these diverse and important interests—and our sharpened national perception of them—we must consider the forces of change which define the environment in which those interests are pursued.

With rapid change comes instability. In the past year we have witnessed a revolution in Iran, a coup d'etat in Afghanistan and spreading insurrection there, continued internal strife in Lebanon, and the escalating dispute over the western Sahara in North Africa. All reflect unending turmoil which outsiders are powerless to control. The issue for the United States, therefore, is not whether change will occur, but how we deal with it.

Our tendency too often has been to consider change as threatening. That need not be so. After all, our country has been and remains one of the fastest changing in the world. Our heritage is revolutionary. Our society has thrived on change. The spirit of innovation has produced human and technological achievements which cause other developing societies to look to us for leadership. These achievements are the hallmarks of our capacity to advance the human condition through harnessing change.

Dangers do exist in the Middle East. We cannot ignore them. At the same time, I propose that we look at the changes occurring there as an opportunity to build, not solely as a danger to destroy. As Secretary Vance said in Chicago last May, the United States must be seen as a power that uses its tremendous resources—diplomatic, military, economic—to promote healthy change and not as the power employing its military might to repress change.

Our task is to work with the moderate governments of the area, to try to help them direct change into constructive channels. It is they who have to cope with the consequences of an economic revolution, where, in some, fast increases in oil revenues have produced new power of global dimensions at a

time when their societies are experiencing the painful stresses and strains of rapid modernization. Nor are any governments there immune from the pressures of new-found nationalism, of the Islamic revival, of the traditional rivalries within the region, which, together with the economic revolution, feed change and instability.

For our part, we have great assets in helping these nations meet the challenge. While some are just beginning to enjoy the independence and power which their resources provide them, they are also finding that interdependence is equally a force in the modern world. Whether it be in food production and imports, acquiring industrial and consumer goods, importing skilled and unskilled labor, no nation. no matter how rich, can prosper on its own. With few exceptions, the peoples of North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwestern Asia want a good working relationship with us. They value our know-how, our practicality and inventiveness, our technology, our educational system, and share many of our values.

They know we respect their right to solve their own problems and to preserve their own freedom. They know that we do not ask them to be like us—but only to work with us in a shared desire for an orderly and peaceful world. Our acceptance of a pluralistic world enables us to contribute rather than to dominate. While they recognize we have our own interests in the area, they also recognize that we will pursue them with respect for their integrity.

Strategy for Peace

This brings me to the third point I mentioned in opening—that the only sensible policy for us in the Middle East is one designed overall to permit us to pursue all our interests simultaneously in conditions of orderly change.

Our problem is that interests as diverse as ours sometimes come into conflict

with one another. The most obvious example is the difficulty over the years of pursuing steadfast support for Israel while preserving and developing the relationships we need in the Arab world. Nor can we totally thwart Soviet designs on the region, or pursue humanitarian aspirations to end the plight of refugees and release valuable resources for economic development, so long as the Arab-Israeli conflict is allowed to fester and periodically explode.

We have discovered over the past 6 years that a strategy centered on finding an Arab-Israeli peace best meets our interests. It allows us to work closely with all of the key nations in the Middle East in pursuing a common, if difficult, objective. We have been helped by the common perception in the area that we are the one outside nation able to help obtain settlement by diplomatic means, rather than the military means which have proved so fruitless.

We do not delude ourselves that this is an easy task. It is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, this active search for peace not only enables us to pursue the full range of our national interests in the Middle East; it also can claim full support of the American people, harmonizing as it does the strategic, economic, political, moral, and humane interests of this nation. In the Middle East we need not be torn between current perceptions of strategic interests and our humane and moral interests, as we were during the decade of Vietnam.

Egyptian-Israeli Peace

The progress of the past year in moving toward an Arab-Israeli peace has been historic. Today after three decades of recurrent war without hope, the prospect for peace in the Middle East is real. For the first time negotiations are directed toward lasting peace—not just temporary armistice. They are built on real achievement by brave and dedicated leaders who have had the courage to put aside fatalistic assumptions about the insolubility of the conflict between them—President Sadat, Prime

Minister Begin, and President Carter. The Treaty of Peace Between Egypt and Israel signed on the White House lawn last March 26 opened the door to negotiated peace between Israel and all its neighbors.

The first gigantic step came in September of last year, when the leaders of Egypt and Israel agreed at Camp David on two "framework" documents for peace in the Middle East. The first set forth the principles for a comprehensive peace and established the basis for proceeding with negotiations on the West Bank and Gaza, where Palestinians would participate in determining their own future. The second document established the basic terms governing an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. When those terms were actually translated into a contractual peace agreement last March 26, President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin signed a joint letter addressed to President Carter setting forth a time frame for the West Bank/Gaza negotiations.

Americans can take pride in the role their country played in this historic event. Both leaders have paid tribute to the key role of President Carter. I can say as a professional that without the courage, vision, and persistence of our President, this first practical step in 30 years toward peace in the Middle East would not have been taken.

The Egyptian-Israeli Treaty is now being scrupulously implemented. It was reached through mutual concessions-Egypt, by breaking the pattern of confrontation and giving full recognition to Israel; Israel by agreeing to withdraw completely from the Sinai. The treaty opens new avenues for trade and communications; for economic, scientific, and social betterment; and for the enhancement of learning and cultural exchange. Its achievement against heavy odds is a demonstration to men and women everywhere that human reason, common sense, goodwill, hard work, and faith can prevail. Its careful implementation is demonstrating that even those who have been adversaries for generations can overcome enmity and make peace.

Status of the Peace Process

As important as the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty is, it is not an end in itself. It is still only the first step on the long and difficult road to a comprehensive peace. Peace has come to Egypt and Israel; it has not come to the other peoples involved. Until it does, the peoples of Egypt and Israel cannot realize fully the benefits of their peace and there can be no end to the tension and hostility which have plagued the Middle East. All the governments at Camp David have committed themselves to a comprehensive peace. The process outlined in September 1978 by President Sadat, Prime Minister Begin, and President Carter at Camp David continues.

The principal unfinished item on the Middle East agenda is the relationship between Israel and her other neighbors, particularly between Israel and the Palestinian Arab people. What we seek, as full partner in continuing negotiations, is a permanent basis for assuring the full security of Israel and, at the same time, satisfaction of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.

To that end, Egypt, Israel, and the United States have entered the next phase of negotiations set out in the Camp David framework. For the first time in 30 years, we have begun a negotiation which concentrates on issues of concern to the Palestinians as well as protection of Israel's security. We have embarked on negotiating the series of practical steps laid out at Camp David, by which more than 1 million Palestinians living on the West Bank and Gaza—and eventually those displaced by war now living elsewhere—can participate in determining their future.

These negotiations have been underway since late May with Ambassador Robert Strauss heading the American negotiating team. It is important to understand their objective. They are a first stage in dealing with the issues of the West Bank and Gaza. What we are attempting to do is build a political structure—a self-governing authority—on the West Bank and Gaza that

takes into account the leigitimate interests of both Israelis and Palestinians. This step is designed to pave the way over a succeeding 5-year transitional period for working out the final status of these territories. This first step is to give them full autonomy to run their lives through their own self-governing body and to participate in negotiations on the final status of these territories.

This is complicated. No one before has defined "full autonomy" in such circumstances. The three parties to the present talks are developing a transitional arrangement-not deciding the final status of the territories. Yet that self-governing authority must be meaningful and credible so that Palestinians will be willing to vote and participate in picking leaders who will represent them in the next round of negotiations during the 5-year transitional period. Obviously, many deep differences exist at this early stage. Over the past 5 months the negotiating teams and their two working groups have been laying the technical basis for deciding just what will be the content of autonomy.

Progress has been slow, painstaking, and not highly visible. But it is there in the steady achievements of the working

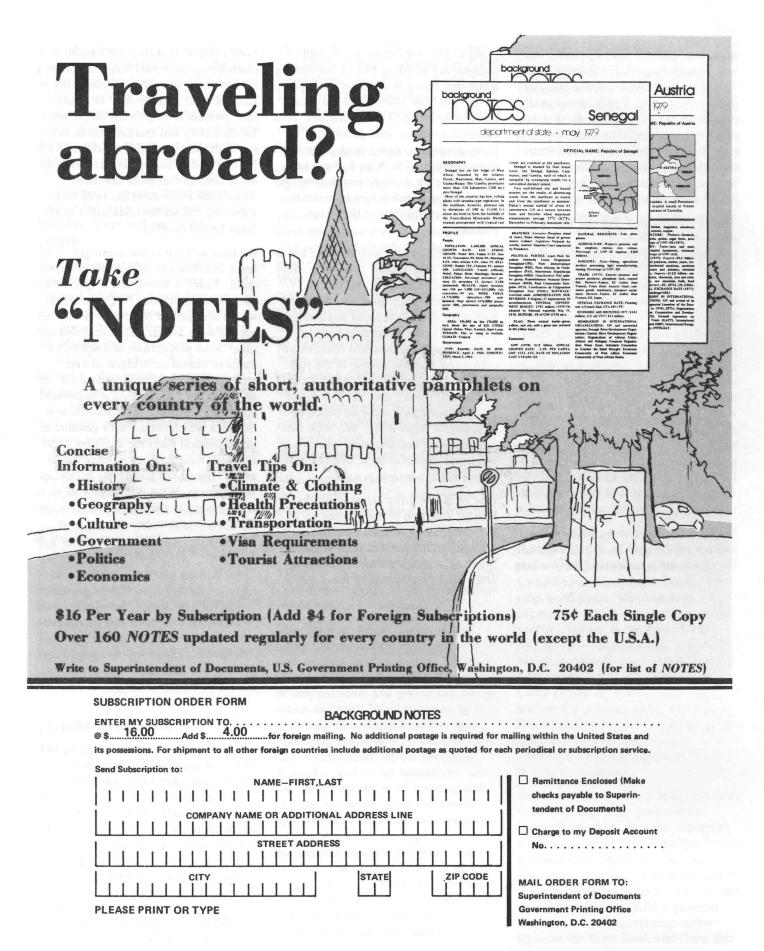
groups. The achievements, though modest, are building blocks for turning autonomy into a reality. As you know, we have a May 1980 target date for completing these first negotiations. It is essential to insure that genuine, if slow, progress is being made, that substantial progress is there by next year, that we are on the way to resolving the remaining difficult issues in order to insure the credibility of the peace process.

This credibility is essential, if we are to encourage Palestinians and other Arab nations and leaders to join in the negotiations. They must see that these negotiations are a genuine beginning. It is no secret that a sizeable body of opinion in the Arab world remains unconvinced that our course is the right one. Rather than a step toward a comprehensive peace, they see the Egypt-Israeli Treaty as a separate peace destructive of Arab unity. We hope that attitudes will become more positive as the world sees that these negotiations can produce concrete results.

One of the positive elements in the present situation is that parties on all sides are taking a fresh look at their interests in the present fluid situation. Signs exist that the Palestinians and other Arabs are watching the negotia-

tions closely, that they are carefully considering their next steps, and that a certain sense of realism is emerging in parts of their relationship. In Israel, too, awareness is growing of the need for creativity and imagination in dealing with the Palestinian problem. As for the United States, we see evidence all around us that more and more Americans understand the need to resolve the Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Success will not come overnight. Violence continues to poison the environment. Years of hatred and suspicion are not easily overcome. At Camp David we all recognized this truth. Since the gap between Israeli and Palestinian and other Arab perceptions of each other's motives cannot be bridged in one stroke, the Camp David framework sets up a process for evolving a negotiated solution over time. Each success and the trust which comes with genuine accommodation form the basis for tackling still harder issues in later stages and a context for testing the results of negotiations. What remains for us all is to persevere in the course we have set. This we intend to do-for our own interests in the Middle East, as well as for those of the peoples living there.



List of Notes

Background Notes are available by subscription (\$31.00 per year, plus \$7.75 for foreign mailing), as single copies (70 cents, plus 20 cents additional for foreign mailing), and as complete sets of current Notes (at least 140, for \$31.00 per set, plus \$7.75 for foreign mailing). Write to the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402 (include order number for desired items).

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